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**TESTIMONY OF JOSEPH C. BECKER  
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AMERICAN NATIONAL RED CROSS**

**Before the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure  
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings and Emergency Management  
*United States House of Representatives***

Chairwoman Norton and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I am honored to appear here today on behalf of the American Red Cross. My name is Joe Becker, and I lead disaster services for the American Red Cross.

As you know, the Red Cross is the helping hand in times of disasters and emergencies. We shelter, feed and provide emotional support to those impacted by disasters in communities across our country and the world. We supply nearly half of the nation's blood. We teach lifesaving skills. And we support the military and their families. Whether it is a hurricane or a heart attack, a call for blood or a call for help, the Red Cross is there.

To date, we have had more than fifteen thousand volunteers working across the gulf providing food, shelter, and needed supplies to those affected by hurricanes Gustav and Ike. In many cases, our workers are living in group shelters and putting in very long hours, but each is called to serve because each wants to help those in need. Our volunteers respond to literally hundreds of disasters a day, ranging from single family fires to massive regional operations. Right now we have significant large-scale relief operations across Texas, Louisiana, and six other states.

The GAO's report on the role of voluntary organizations in providing mass care during a catastrophic event addresses a critical issue for our time. That issue is how the nation will meet the mass care needs that would be created by a worst-case, large-scale disaster such as a nuclear event, an earthquake in a major city, or a major hurricane striking a large metropolitan area. The American Red Cross and other voluntary agencies have played and will play an essential role in helping the victims of catastrophic events in our nation. If we falter, so will the nation's response.

At the Red Cross, we take this responsibility very seriously. In recent years, we have invested money and resources in expanding our capacity to handle large disasters, strategically reorganized our workforce around the anticipated needs, and worked diligently to lead the sector in collaboration and resource sharing. Together we have made significant progress; however, we must continue to challenge ourselves to improve. But in a catastrophic event such as the worst-case scenarios described in the report, no one organization – and no one sector – can do it all.

The Federal Government cannot do it all. The American Red Cross cannot do it all. The NGO community cannot do it all. Catastrophic disasters are by definition larger than any single organization or system, and must be addressed by a partnership among government at all levels, voluntary organizations, and the private sector.

### **Brief Overview of Mass Care and the American Red Cross**

In a typical year, the American Red Cross responds to more than 70,000 natural and human-caused disasters, ranging from single family fires to large-scale, multi-state events. While every disaster is unique, the response is uniform as the Red Cross meets immediate needs through a nationwide system of disaster planning, readiness, response and recovery. In the earliest days of a disaster, our service priority is mass care, which includes sheltering, feeding, distribution of needed supplies, disaster health services, and disaster mental health services.

Red Cross disaster responses are primarily led and delivered by volunteers. In addition to local volunteers who respond to an average of 200 disasters a day nationwide, a network of more than 70,000 trained volunteers is available for possible travel outside of their home areas to respond to larger events. The Red Cross also has the capacity to manage large numbers of spontaneous volunteers, with more than 230,000 volunteers participating in the 2005 response to hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma. In addition, key partners like those named in this report as well as NAACP, Hope Worldwide, Tzu Chi Buddhist Foundation, Boat People SOS, and faith organizations further expand mass care and direct client services capabilities. Our model for disaster services is collaborative, diverse, and inclusive; it takes the entire community to deliver an effective response in a large-scale event.

The foundation of the American Red Cross service delivery model is our chapter network, with more than 700 chapters across the nation that respond to the bulk of disasters. While the fundamentals of this model have been in place for several decades, the way that we support the structure on a national level continues to evolve. In May of this year, we created a tiered regional structure that shifted more disaster resources from headquarters to field units. We also downsized by approximately 1000 jobs, mostly at national headquarters, in order to reduce our cost structure.

Under our newly implemented structure, community chapters meet the needs of smaller disasters, larger regional chapters coordinate resources and lead responses, and each state coordinates state risk planning, volunteer development, readiness development, and partnership development. As has been the case for many years, larger responses (about 50 to 80 a year) are coordinated nationally.

In most responses, the Red Cross actively engages key community agencies, faith based groups, and the business sector to join in responding to community needs and to ensure an effective and scalable mass care response. We work side-by-side with local government agencies and state and federal agencies to ensure that needs are met in a coordinated fashion. We are seeing this coordinated approach work today in the response to hurricanes Gustav and Ike.

### **GAO Report Overview**

The Red Cross agrees with the report's acknowledgement that voluntary organizations play a critical role in providing care to people affected by emergencies and natural disasters. The Red Cross, Salvation Army, Southern Baptist Convention, and Catholic Charities – among others – are part of the nation's emergency response infrastructure and a significant source of mass care services in major disasters. The report also accurately states that the Red Cross and other major

voluntary organizations have taken many steps since the storms of 2005 to strengthen service delivery and improve collaboration.

The Red Cross is engaged in year-round planning to ensure that we are as prepared as possible for likely future events. However, there are practical limits to the capabilities of any one organization. As described in the GAO report, the Red Cross can envision large-scale disasters that would create needs that would surpass current capabilities. Effective responses require working with assets across many sectors, from government to non-government partners to community based organizations to citizens themselves. Citizens and response organizations share an obligation to be prepared to participate in an effective response.

### **Red Cross Capacity Improvements**

To illustrate the American Red Cross's capacity for a large-scale operation, the GAO report notes that the American Red Cross has identified and entered into agreements with 50,000 potential shelter facilities across the country and that it has enough sheltering supplies, such as cots and blankets, to support up to 500,000 people in shelters. It also mentions our stockpile of shelf-stable meals and our ability to provide about one million hot meals per day over a six day period in partnership with the Southern Baptist Convention. These capacity improvements were made in the months immediately after Hurricane Katrina, and cost the organization in excess of \$80 million.

Since 2005, the Red Cross has almost tripled the number of trained workers and volunteers from 26,000 to 75,000. We have positioned redundant communication equipment in 42 chapters. Perhaps most importantly, we have signed agreements with more than 150 organizations to help expand our capacity and reach into diverse communities.

### **Sheltering**

As stated in the GAO report, sheltering depends on available volunteers as well as buildings, and there are limits to what one organization can do. At our peak after Katrina, we sheltered more than 140,000, and just a few weeks ago we sheltered 58,000 on a single night during Hurricane Gustav. But there are scenarios that create sheltering needs that can only be addressed through a combined effort that includes organizations beyond the Red Cross. Furthermore, the availability of public buildings for sheltering is also largely a government decision that is outside of our organization's control.

The report highlights sheltering capacity in Washington, DC as 13,000, and cites our forecast of a far greater need for sheltering in the event of a nuclear attack in Washington. Note, however, that it is often better to shelter in adjacent cities if a city's infrastructure is severely compromised. This is consistent with the model we most recently employed during Hurricane Ike, where Houston area evacuees were housed in shelters as far away as San Antonio and Dallas. In such instances, the realized sheltering capacity would be much higher than the 13,000 spaces that were identified in the Washington area. While we understand that evacuees would rather stay in or near their home communities, safe buildings, power, and infrastructure are obviously critical components to a safe shelter environment.

### **Red Cross Staff Reductions**

The report states that the effect of this year's staff reductions at the Red Cross remains to be seen, but our performance during this year's hurricane season is a strong indicator that our capabilities

have not been compromised. While the number of paid staff in the organization is smaller, our remaining resources are more directly focused on critical functions such as disaster relief. Furthermore, more than 90% of workers responding to disasters are volunteers, and the number of available trained volunteers has increased substantially since 2005.

The report accurately acknowledges our concern that the lack of full-time dedicated Red Cross staff in FEMA Regional Offices could hamper communications and impede coordination efforts. To address this issue, we have requested federal funding to restore these positions. We are also working closely with FEMA to secure funding for these positions in the near term.

### **Documenting the Red Cross Role in a Catastrophic Disaster**

Regarding the report's reference to the lack of documentation about the Red Cross's role in a catastrophic disaster, the Red Cross works closely with FEMA on a daily basis and our organization and FEMA have a strong understanding of our role. Although the Catastrophic Incident Supplement has not been updated since the National Response Framework was finalized, the Red Cross and FEMA agree that the Red Cross will serve in the same Support Agency role in a catastrophic disaster as it does in other disasters. In addition, the Red Cross and FEMA agree on the Red Cross's service delivery role in a catastrophic disaster. Formally documenting this agreement would be beneficial in future responses.

The GAO report makes several recommendations for action by FEMA which are best addressed by our colleagues at FEMA.

### **Conclusion**

The landscape for the interaction of the voluntary sector and disaster relief has changed dramatically in the past 10 years. Events such as 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina have illustrated the need for a large and integrated system of responders, both government and private, that plan and work together to meet monumental needs in catastrophic environments. Recent events such as the California Wildfires, the 2008 Midwest Floods, and this year's ongoing hurricane operations have required an unprecedented level of integration, partnerships, and community collaboration.

We have stated in the past that no major metropolitan area is adequately prepared to respond to a catastrophic event. Furthermore, while the Red Cross has an obligation to the country to be ready and is taking steps to improve our capacity to respond, it is not possible for any one organization to build and sustain a level of preparedness adequate for large scale events. Effective response requires action from government at all levels, non-governmental organizations, and especially citizens. The country's response capabilities must be built, applied, and assessed collectively.

Recent disaster responses have also demonstrated that the public expects our largest historical efforts in service delivery to become the norm. That pace has forced critical agencies such as those named in the GAO report as well as many others to expend resources (both material and financial) at a rate that can outpace fundraising and/or revenue. In short, expectations of the sector in both quality and quantity of service delivery have created what may be an unsustainable system that our sector can no longer maintain.

It is clear that catastrophic planning and response for mass care on the scale referenced in the GAO report cannot be accomplished through charitable funding alone. Voluntary agencies will always face challenges in fundraising, especially during difficult economic times. This year, the Red Cross has responded to a record number of disasters, but fundraising has lagged far behind.

We have re-doubled our fundraising efforts and have launched an aggressive nationwide campaign to raise \$100 million, but that alone will not cover our costs. That is why we are also seeking a Congressional appropriation of \$150M for disaster services, and we respectfully urge Congress to pass it in this session.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my testimony, the American Red Cross and other voluntary agencies play a critical role in our nation's ability to respond to a catastrophic event. And, while no one organization or sector can do it all, we take our obligation to the country very seriously. Again, if we falter, so will our nation's response.

Thank you for inviting me here today to discuss this important issue with you. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.